

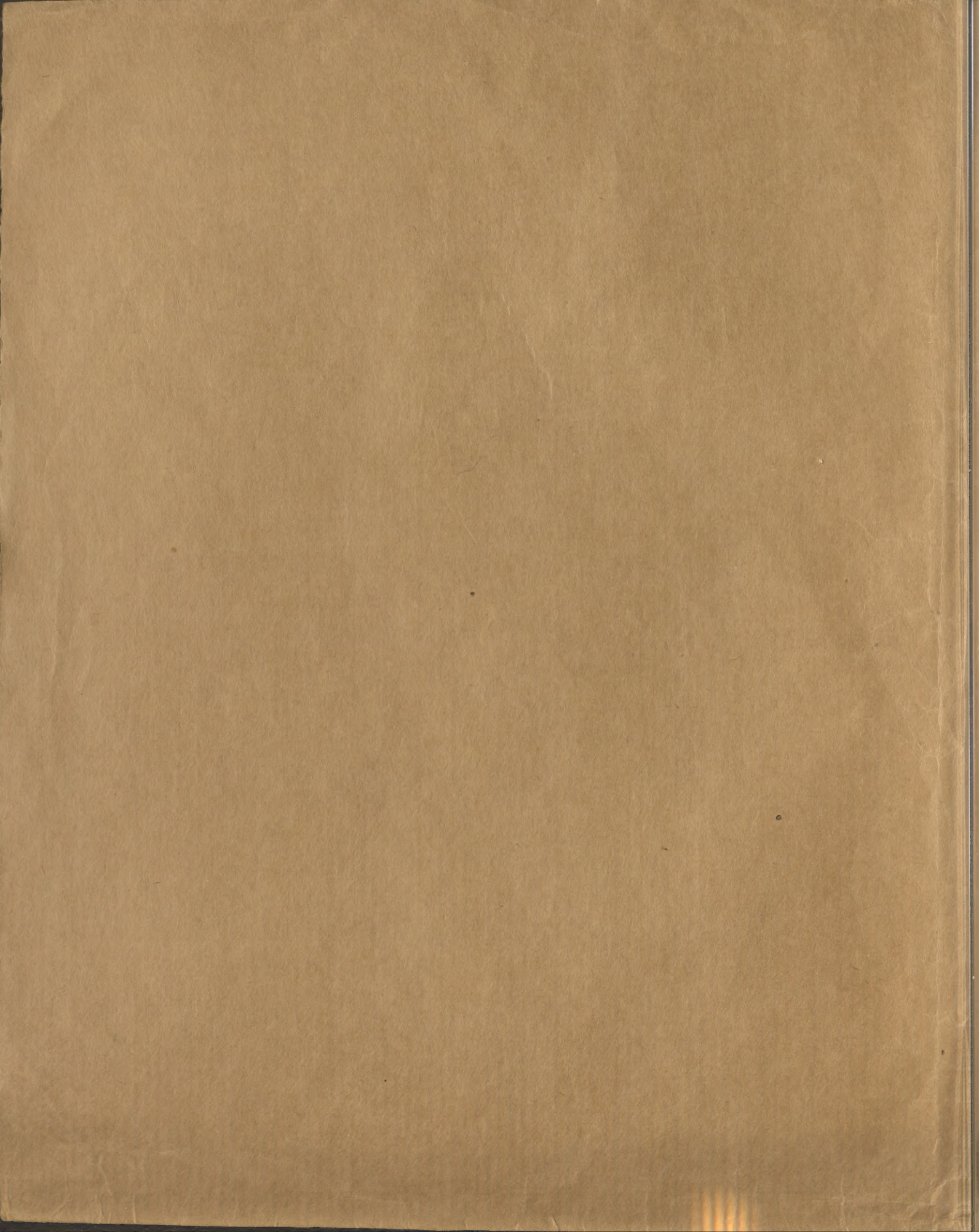
MARION M. SCOTT PAPERS

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THE HOME OF ALL OUR MORTAL DREAM

1. LONDON ITSELF

Next to the sea London has most shaped the destinies of England. The city is as much an inevitable fact as the noble river on whose banks it stands. No man can say when it began; no man dare say when it shall end. In a way it belongs to the world, being one of the great works of man's soul and hands. In the direct sense it is the possession of the Empire; more intimately still it is the heart of England. Beyond that again it is the home, the treasure, the dear love of Londoners. Just as the English character is incomprehensible to foreigners so, I think, is the born Londoner a sealed book to other members of the British race. We know our city as sailors know the sea: we divine its currents of emotion as Thames pilots sense their channels when bringing in great ships; and we experience an utter contentment when in the City itself that I can only liken to the contentment of seagulls swinging up and down upon the sea-waves, riding the surface of an immense energy with utter restfulness.

In this restfulness the elements of birth and environment mix with something that must be racial, the inherited memories maybe, of ancestors who were citizens of London, bred in its ways and steadfast in its liberties for centuries before we were thought of. Probably these Londoners like myself can no more

recall their first sight of London than their first sight of their fathers and mothers. London was simply there, and their awareness of it grew with themselves.

My Father was born in the Parish of St. Bride, in an old house almost under the shadow of St. Paul's. But I was born in the outer fringe of London at Upper Sydenham, where town and country met. Today it is part of Greater London. But then a few open fields were still left within a child's reach, and the trees and gardens were thickly luxuriant. So it comes that my early pictures of London are preluded by the sight of a purple lilac bush against a blue sky, a grove of pink horse chestnut trees in blossom, and a road out between fields where my infant feet ploughed lightly through sand when I pattered to pick such London wild flowers as white clover, pink persicaria, scarlet pimpernel, clutched by me into hot posies to present to my Mother on Sunday mornings.

Presently we moved over the hill to Upper Norwood. This brought us to the inner rim of the Thames basin and so, at a little distance above our house, within sight of London when the weather was clear. Then I would see, beyond the foreground of trees and houses, the far towers of Westminster and - following the line of the river which showed like a floating band of delicate mist - I would pick out to eastward the Law Courts, the spires of Wren's city churches and the great dome of St. Paul's Cathedral with its cross shining out goldenly above the blues and

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grays of the rest. Farther east yet was the Tower Bridge with its upstanding shape to remind one that London is a maritime city. Behind all were the soft heights of Highgate and Hampstead, and yet more distant, Harrow Church upon its Hill. I thought it all lovely then; I think it but more lovely now; one of the noblest views in the world.

Often there were days when the mists made it impossible to see far. London became, as it were, a pillar of cloud. But in the companioning nights it became a pillar of fire, for the glow of its innumerable lights would be thrown up, mirrored on the clouds, till that quarter of dark heaven was suffused with orange light, and I, in my little room would look with awe at these unwavering northern lights and would listen for that deep hum-note on the horizon which gradually emerged on my hearing as silence fell around - that sound which was the sound of London, mysterious as "the murmur of the outer Infinite", or of the sea at night undertoned by the ground swell.

There have been many Londons; there are many Londons; indivisible in themselves and one with the life of England. Yet never since London began has any single generation experienced such tremendous changes in the world as mine. To span those changes is a fearful, but proud, privilege. When I was a child the world seemed so settled - so rangé, if I may borrow the French term - that my sisters and I concluded with some regret history had come to an end. Had we but known! Happily we did not know, and when my Mother read aloud Jules Verne's

"Twenty Thousand Miles under the Sea" we classed it as pure fairy tale, and for our strongest asseveration of impossibility used to say "You might as well try to fly".

Unfortunately this impossibility has now become only too possible, and, as Leonardo da Vinci foresaw when he withheld the secret of flight, mankind has evilly misused it. No longer is the sea London's sure defence. Germany's airmen have poured over in hundreds, sullyng the very air by their presence, and leaving behind them hurts upon London which no reprisals by us, no restitution by them, could ever restore. The feelings engendered in us are past anger and hatred. They have become cold, impersonal, implacable like a cosmic law, wasting no strength and wanting no sympathy.

Yet for London itself in these days of sorrow we feel a deepened tenderness. Thinking of it with that intensity of longing in which emotion and thought fuse into a strange clairvoyance, I recall a thousand facets of its life and of its changing fashions in Victorian, Edwardian, and Georgian days, in the Four Years War, and the Peace that was no peace but only the calm at the centre of the hurricane. Among all these myriad mind-pictures there are a few that separate themselves from the rest - the times when (as with a living person) the very soul of London shone out unaware.

The earliest was when, as a girl of seventeen returning from my first ball, tired, happy, with little white kid shoes danced dusty and dirty, I and my parents drove out over

Westminster Bridge in the magical brightness of a June sunrise. It was the view and hour of which Wordsworth wrote though his green fields had gone, the towers, temples and palaces were there, flooded with a tide of sunlight as full as the high water in the river. Westminster Abbey, the Houses of Parliament, rose out of the quiet streets, daffodil and blue, casting their shadows, like the laying on of a benediction.

Years later a poet and I paced back and forth over Waterloo Bridge watching the glory of an autumn sunset. Westward the towers and chimneys of Chelsea, were upthrust dark against the glowing crimson, gold and green of the sky. The outgoing water slid beneath Rennie's calm-spanning arches, rounding the river curve and taking our sight away to the east where the spires of the City and the great dome of St. Paul's, rising high in the sky, were lit by a pale green radiance of reflection. Everything, it seemed, that London is was in that view - the majesty of Empire at Westminster; the heart of freedom at St. Paul's.

Still later I recall a winter sunset when - by myself this time - I left the south bank to walk across London Bridge. I could hardly move for the beauty of that scene. Yet even then I felt something in it which lay upon the borders of the present and the Beyond, an extraordinary steadfastness and a sense of farewell. Across the water with its endless traffic of big and little boats and behind the water-front of the warehouses with their stocky, journeyman weather-beaten faces, rose the multitude of Wren's Churches around his master-piece of St. Paul's.

All of them answered the sunset with a glow upon their heights that was as lovely as the Alpenglüh upon snow. Against the sky they stood and shone, their Portland stone turned to rose topaz. Loveliest of all, with its light, terraced spire, was St. Bride's Fleet Street.

By now my family and I had long been living in London itself Russell Square, Manchester Square, Westbourne Terrace, and these sudden revelations of London's beauty happened during the course of its, and our, ordinary life. Then came a time when the whole of England and the Empire focussed its good will on the Imperial City for the Silver Jubilee of King George V. London has been for centuries the meeting place for men and women from the ends of the earth, but never before had they poured in with such cheerfulness and affection as now. Queen Victoria's Jubilee may have been a more resounding spectacle, but King George's was almost like a thanksgiving sacrament between himself and his peoples. He had passed with them through such perils of War; he had fought with great perils of illness himself and returned from them as from the grave, frailer in health but firm as ever in spirit. London flowered to its fullest splendour to welcome him.

My Father, now a past Master of the City of London Solicitors' Company and the oldest practising solicitor in the City, took my Mother and me to see the decorations for the event. Mile after mile we drove along ways dazzling with masts, shields, flags, flowers, movement and colour, till we came to the square mile of

the City itself which was perhaps the most powerful, as it was certainly one of the richest on earth. Wealth there of every sort; wealth of money, history, beauty, tradition and the proudest gold of liberty. That is the square mile whose citizens in the past have dared give check to Kings and have put a curb upon Parliaments. That is the Square Mile whose merchants trade with the world and whose ships sail the Seven Seas. Now of its own free will the City was expressing fealty and love for King George and its ancient streets were incredibly alive and gay.

In Cheapside on Ludgate Hill, everywhere we looked, flags and pennons, tossed in a tangle that caught the sunlight, and fascinated the eyes, making great vistas of colour beneath which crowds came and went, bright-faced, curious, festive. Every hour more people poured into London. From the eve of the Jubilee Day itself London became unsleeping. That night in the warm darkness one was conscious of the moving millions. Yet there was no hustle and no anxiety: only the great tide lifting quietly on its own strength, unflawed by wind or opposing currents. As the pulsating strokes of Big Ben floated across the Park telling midnight, I, high in my room at Westbourne Terrace could sense beneath the ,lingering sound London itself breathing as tranquilly as a summer sea. "All's well", I said to myself, "All's well".

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I was glad my Father had not lived to see this. Yet what gave me the sharpest pang of horror was oddly enough to smell that characteristic odour of an ancient church's interior from the

Six years later, in June 1941, I entered the City to sign my Will. It was Midsummer. Early though the hour was by sun-time, all London sweltered beneath a bright haze in which hundreds of barrage balloons floated like silver fish in a shining sea, their noses south-east, their tails north-west in the light breeze. A haze is natural in hot weather. What was strange about this one was the dust it held in solution - dust so impalpable that it hardly snowed as grains, but stung acridly upon one's face and lips. I came in over London Bridge. Looking down Thames, the Tower and Tower Bridge heaved their familiar bulks against the sky, but ahead..... I hardly knew whether I was more moved by what had vanished or what remained. The stocky warehouses with their journeymans' faces were dead, many of Wren's Churches were gone, the sky-line had changed. In other parts of bombed London public clocks had stopped at the time of concussion anywhere round the dial. Here, as I advanced up the City, few survived to tell the time of their own destruction; only the empty frames remained. I came into Cheapside. Vista-like King Street led to the tall ruins of the Guildhall. Here, close at hand, was the battered masonry of Bow Church, not gone, but gashed and disordered, with the familiar little figures on its clock knocked silly, and the church open to the street. I was glad my Father had not lived to see this. Yet what gave me the sharpest pang of horror was oddly enough to smell that characteristic odour of an ancient church's interior from the

outside . The scent of Portland stone, pews, books, graves I went on into Watling Street, walking the road that begins in the dawn of English history. I came to St. Paul's where the noble pile of Wren's masterpiece rose ~~even~~ more cliff-like than ever above the open devastation round its eastern end. I stood a long while in the sunlight looking at it. Round the side traffic still flowed, but the buses were now a thin red line, ~~not~~ not a roaring torrent as of yore. Above the southern front, high above the dome itself, the golden cross shone in the sunny air. It had become the symbolic rallying point of the world in the struggle against evil. I came back through Watling Street again. On either side the houses were ruined, their shells and shards letting through more sunlight than since that time in September 1666, when the Great Fire rased the City. It was very quiet now . Hardly any men used it. The few I met, like the many who still passed to and fro in Cheapside, had faces saddened by the continual contemplation of sorrow, and their backs bowed by its burden. A van or two, horse-drawn, moved slowly down the roadway. Pedestrians walked there too - it was smoother and more foot-sure. On the steps of a bombed office a boy sat whistling, his youth and cheerfulness accentuating the surrounding hush. Slowly I picked my way not to twist my ankle in the bomb-pocks. My shoes were white with the dust of London's dead buildings, the aftermath from Hitler's Dance of Death.

But here in the sunlit silence one could hardly remember

Hitler; he merged into the distance of history as an incident. But the devastation remained. I thought to myself "This is at least the third time in two thousand years this thing has happened. When London was deserted by the Romans and savaged by the Saxons it lay desolate for decades. Along this very road wolves and rabbits ranged as they liked. London rose again. When the Great Fire swept from east to west the City was once more brought low; the citizens walked sadly through the beloved ruins as I do now. It rose again. This time the City has been wounded in a great cause, greater than the world has ever known. Better these ruins than the grandeurs of Paris, saved at the price of dishonour. "Resurgam".

I paused. In the warmth and silence there welled up the old peace beneath, around and over me. Was it only something racial - the tranquillity of the sea-bird afloat upon its remembered sea? Or was it something better - the benediction of God in the solitude?

Victoria - Victorian; the present tense and the past. The time when the great Queen was the Empire's centre of gravity and the time when people grained at her mere memory. Now the great tense too has passed into history, and Victoria's greatness is again recalled.

Looking out over the English Channel, I thought of the old days when the great ships of the world were seen in the distance, and the great ships of the world were seen in the distance, and the great ships of the world were seen in the distance.